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Future public policy and its knowledge base: shaping worldviews through counterfactual world-making

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ABSTRACT

Research in diverse areas such as climate change, happiness and wellbeing emphasizes the need for transformative change, stressing the importance of rethinking established values, goals and paradigms prevailing among civil servants, policy- and decision makers. In this paper, we discuss a role that design can play in this, especially how processes of counterfactual world-making can help facilitate reflection on worldviews and the shape of future forms of governance. By exploring different presents, rather than conditions in the future, this approach allows civil servants to consider, create and resist playful alternatives to business-as-usual. In this way, we demonstrate how design can stimulate imagination both as to futures and people's role in shaping these futures.

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Introduction: design, policy and imagination

Design approaches and policy labs have gained momentum within the public sector. Compared to mainstream policy-making, which is more rooted in rationalistic and evidence-based approaches (i.e. what has worked before), these initiatives build their work on user-centred design, ethnography, iterative experimentation and a culture that allows a wide variety of perspectives and new ideas to emerge (Kimbell 2015). They are reported as successful, but also as in a constant struggle with established policy-making culture, which makes it unclear how efficient they will be in the end (Bailey and Lloyd 2016).

Despite these difficulties, the wicked societal problems now accumulating and inter-connecting suggest policy takes further steps away from over-rationalistic approaches aimed at incremental problem solving (Hartley, Kuecker, and Woo 2019). Current challenges are characterized by conflicting values: for example, that humanity needs to support equitable human development whilst preserving the bio-physical integrity of

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Earth systems (Gerst, Raskin, and Rockström 2013). It is possible to find direct tensions between democracy and sustainable development (Lafferty 2012; Tainter 2006; Ward 2012), for instance, politically significant parts of the population may reject goals such as social inclusion or less-energy-demanding lifestyles. These tensions are enshrined in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs), where Economic Growth (Goal 8) sits at odds with ambitions such as Climate Action (Goal 13) and Peace and Justice (Goal 16). Several recent research reports and papers emphasize the need for transformative and paradigmatic shifts to cope with these multifaceted concerns (Gerst, Raskin, and Rockström 2013; Brondizio et al. 2019; Light, Wolstenholme, and Twist 2019).

In this paper, we argue that an important step to propel transformative change is to nurture our capacity for imagination and use this to re-think taken-for-granted worldviews that might otherwise prohibit alternative ideas to emerge. The call for increased imagination can be seen in many disciplines (Unger 1987; Harvey 2000; Kirsey 2013), not least, though, it can potentially be a way to rethink the present and challenge hegemonic political ideals and petrified academic positions (Srnicek and Williams 2015; Harvey 2000). This creative rethinking might concern futures, but also address the way that the conceiving of futures is made available for public scrutiny and participation.

In the next section, we outline why we need to rethink public policy-making. We then explore the connection between design and worldviews and present a case where counterfactual world-making has been used to develop radical concepts for future governance, based on collaboration between designers, researchers and policy-makers from the City of Malmö in Sweden. Finally, we discuss some implications, opportunities and limitations of this approach.

Why we need to rethink public policy-making

Today it has become commonplace to hear that public policy-making is in “crisis,” an ambivalent warning whose divergent interpretations may be used to support equally diverse projects across the political spectrum (Piore and Skinner 2019). We see both that the “old” ways of conducting policy work are unable to solve pressing global problems and that they have been circumvented by new ways as nation-state borders have become increasingly porous amidst, ironically, the apparent rise of new nationalism in many parts of the world.

It has become commonplace to use climate change to exemplify the failure of public policy-making in the face of truly global problems (Howlett 2014), but the same is also said of how we attempt to regulate against the risk of financial instability where housing has been commodified as assets tradeable on global markets (Ley 2017), and knee-jerk attempts to control migration have caused numerous human fatalities and made it harder to regulate migration in a way that benefits both sending and receiving countries (De Haas 2005).

At the turn of the millennium, continuing globalization seemed inevitable, with a shift in public policy-making away from the nation-state to the supranational level and an oft-cited concern that this risked a “democratic deficit” by creating new distance between ordinary citizens and policy-makers (Bexell, Tallberg, and Uhlin 2010; Elsig

2007). Events such as the US election of Donald Trump and the UK government's decision to leave the EU, despite a public swing in favor of remaining, signaled an apparent reversal of political globalization, but with doubtful democratic credentials. The "nation" has returned as a central cultural concept in populist politics, but it has also become a threat to democratic decision-making, used to justify the curtailment of civil rights. Governments are more intent on defining the "foreign other" that must be kept out, than regulating to prevent existential threats (Kaltwasser 2012). As we write, a pandemic has changed relations again, with locked-down residents, often-contradictory policies disengaged from informed societal debate, and further curtailment of civic and democratic processes.

These rapidly changing contexts show how inflexible and/or remote policy processes can be. Traditional models of public policy assume that decision-making must take place within formal legal-institutions—whether a local government planning office, a national legislature, or the United Nations' Security Council. In contrast, there are many examples globally where individuals and groups engage collectively in deciding over public (policy) goods. Cooper speaks of "everyday utopias"—grounded real-world experiments and enactments of alternative ways of being and living—as examples of where individuals engage in political practices to shape their immediate communities to be more conducive to the social good (Cooper 2013). Everyday utopias involve or may facilitate, we argue, a form of public policy decision-making, even outside any legally-based institution. Furthermore, whilst everyday utopias, as spaces in which people can collaborate with one another to construct and enact visions of a "good" society, are easier to achieve at a local level (since it involves fewer persons), there are examples where they do overlap with formal legal-institutions in interesting ways.

Cooper considers one example—the late 1990s introduction of "equality" as a guiding principle in UK national public policy. In that case, local mobilisations for a decade supplied a ready-made repertoire of practical concepts that could be adopted at the national level. The potency of "equality" was diluted by a failure to openly discuss the material gains accrued by the benefactors of inequality, as Cooper notes, but it remains an example of utopian thinking developed at the everyday level that would later be applied to the very highest level of government within a major global economy. Cooper's work on these spaces underlines the importance of everyday social practices in achieving the types of public goods most commonly associated with democracy—that is, a society responsive to human needs, something in which elections and, rarely, referendums, play an important, but not necessarily central, role. These spaces are accountable to the extent they provide "everyday" forms of democracy. Furthermore, such "everyday democracy" offers a more inclusive series of interactions by which to both engage individuals and understand societal problems.

Here, we invoke *the act of democratizing* by bringing people together to work on futures, collaboratively, in the present. This links to Cooper's insights in a number of ways: we employ a utopian method, by encouraging people to speculate on alternatives based on their hopes and fears; we base the stimulus for this in the *everyday* of participants' lived experience yet extrapolate into how things might be other; and we use this as a way of creating everyday utopias from which civil servants can find inspiration. Cooper (2013) says "against the assumption that anything outside the "normal" is

impossible, everyday utopias reveal their possibility. Indeed, it may be the everyday aspect of the activities that most intensifies perceptions of them as strange and unsettling as they offer an alternative model for doing the things people take for granted as necessary to do” (p4). While Cooper relies on prefigurative politics, our work is speculative, yet the components of the inspiration have these points of connection in working for democratization.

We see this as building on Light’s work on *Democratizing Technology*: a project that used performance techniques to engage those excluded from discussion of design choices to consider what the social implications of networking everything might be, before implementation embedded these tools and their impacts (Light 2011; Light et al. 2009). Light (2011, 2019) addresses the designed-therefore-designable nature of the world, hoping to enable participants to take a more active role as citizens facing changes. In this, as in Cooper’s work, we see an urge to resituate decision-making, from a remote center to a more distributed and inclusive whole, and reverse the tendency for top-down jingoistic policy.

Design and worldviews

Several design scholars have emphasized the connection between worldviews and design. The design theorist Redström describes worldviews as “a set of basic beliefs or assumptions that constitute the world for the design, in the sense that they are not really questioned or challenged but rather assumed as its basic condition” (Redström 2017, 96), in part, pointing to a lack of critical reflection on the assumptions they embed. But they also guide the design work and form the basis and shared ground for “what things to look for, what to pay attention to” [109]. Like us, he argues that, although a worldview constitutes a necessary stable core, design experiments have the capacity “to work with a diverse set of inherently unstable and transitional worldviews” [95]. And Dunne and Raby argue that we need to elaborate with a multitude of worldviews to be able to establish new grounds for design that potentially can cope with today’s challenges (2013).

As a concept, the notion of worldview is both elusive and ubiquitous. It is used in many disciplines but it is difficult to find clear empirical evidence for how it works as a psychological framework (Chen et al. 2016; Koltko-Rivera 2004). Koltko-Rivera defines it as the ultimate parent schema, a lens or filter through which one reads or understands reality. It covers assumptions and sets of beliefs about life and reality that strongly influence human behavior and cognition. This can include basic values, but also taken-for-granted assumptions relating to ontology and epistemology (ibid). It affects how much imagination is brought to bear on thinking about alternatives, as well as what those alternatives might be.

Despite its elusive character, we argue that paying attention to—and playfully working on—worldviews helps elaborate on radical opportunities for change in policy-making processes. It allows us to pose questions that make stable arrangements temporarily unstable and reveal taken-for-granted perspectives. Examples of such questions can be: What do we know about the world and how can we know what we know? What is the nature of the human being? What is the relation between human and nature? What is

a good life? How should we organize our society? These questions firmly relate to our understanding of governance.

Methods of engagement

There are many ways a designer can elaborate on worldviews and challenge basic assumptions. Design fiction is one example, where future scenarios that mix design, facts and fiction are used in productive ways to stretch our imaginative capacity (Bleecker 2009). Another related approach is speculative design, which uses provocative “what if” questions, often accompanied by designed physical objects that manifestly intrude in our everyday, but that deny present logics of interpretation. The purpose of this design is to trigger debate and discussions (Dunne and Raby 2013). Some of these approaches have entered into policy design for example the UK Policy Lab that operates within the UK government (Drew 2016) or the Swedish Reglab (Moe 2017). However, it is also important to remember that design expertise is not just a set of methods or tools that can be transferred to other practitioners (as often seems to be presumed in design thinking); it is rather a culture characterized by embedded and situated practices (Kimbell 2012).

This kind of design, making use of evocative and speculative objects, scenarios and images to spark debate, is, however, often criticized for being elitist. As pointed out by Gerber (2018), the priority within speculative and critical design tends to be on “aesthetic vision rather than enabling a collaborative process of imagination” (2). Furthermore, she argues that speculative and critical design rarely manage to reach or involve those who are affected by the implications of the issue they address. This violates the core of participatory-oriented design of the type proposed here. In line with Gerber, we argue that there is great potential in combining speculative and participatory-oriented design approaches. This is partly because it allows for more collaborative forms of speculative and imaginative work, and partly because speculative approaches can allow us to move beyond restrictions and limitations posed by current systems and worldviews (Light 2015; Gerber 2018; Tironi 2018).

Taking on this concern for democratizing policy, in this paper we discuss a case where we used counterfactual world-making. “Counterfactual” worlds come in many varieties and it has been argued that all history is the study of what could have happened differently (Megill 2008). Megill (2008) makes the distinction between *restrained* counterfactuality, in which small details differ, and the radical change that creates alternate histories, which he describes as exuberance. In fiction, this exuberance appears in stories such as *The Man in the High Castle* (Dick 1962) and *Fatherland* (Harris 1992), both of which describe worlds in which the Axis powers win the Second World War instead of the Allies. We chose this (exuberant) counterfactual approach because it has been found an effective way to discuss substantially different futures without having to project forward in time. Working toward and describing an alternative present by starting from a different fork in the past liberates the imagination while embedding the idea that the world is not inevitably as it seems. This is to embed the act of perceiving the “designed, therefore designable” nature of the world in a method, an asset in developing a sense of agency (Light 2011, 2019). This approach both liberates people’s



Figure 1. The counterfactual worlds generator, showing globe.

playfulness by encouraging speculation on a different set of path dependencies and shows what is still possible to change. Stimuli can be across many dimensions, from the cultural to the material, including the growth of different religions, philosophies, infrastructures, fabrics, politics and environmental conditions.

This world-making process had been used before (see Light 2019), but not in the context of developing new forms of governance. This time, Light rewrote the scenarios to prompt thinking about how systems come into being and how society and decision-making are organized. As a set of alternate scenarios, it was designed to make perturbations in thought a basis for considering different styles of governance, beyond incremental change.

Case – world-making for new forms of public policy-making

This experiment began when we received a request from the European Commission's Policy Lab to develop concepts of future governance. (Vesnic-Alujevic 2019). The call

corresponded with some work in hand to develop new ways of thinking about governance more locally. Our aim with these workshops was to explore how we could provoke reflection on worldviews and basic assumptions and how this, in turn, could provide an openness to consider alternative designs when going into concept development. To develop this, we conducted two workshops with a diverse set of participants: researchers (from cultural studies, political science and design), civil servants (from the local municipality and the regional council) and representatives from NGO's and the private sector.

The base of the first workshop was five short written narratives each depicting a specific counterfactual world, offered in one of five small Earth globes (Figure 1), so that groups randomly received a unique scenario to work with and, later, compare. Each group contained mixed competences (researchers, civil servants and representatives from civil and private sectors) that had significant experience of working with policy-making, innovation and design in the public sector. We also ensured that all group included at least one experienced designer by profession who could support others.

Once the groups had received their scenario, there were four stages to the process of arriving at a new form of governance. First, they had to familiarize themselves with the world and the likely implications of living in it, in the present, given the deviation from reality. This included questions as to what constituted everyday life. The next step was to create the story of the world, which also depicted how governance, democracy and forms of decision-making and other social and administrative systems were organized. The groups was then given materials to work with to create a representation of the system as a means to pinpoint specific features. The artifacts and stories formed the basis of a sharing session; then, finally, the whole group shared reflections on what could be learnt from counterfactuality.

In a second workshop, the preliminary ideas were further developed into concepts and formatted into scenarios. To make them more legitimate and productive, the research team also contextualized them in forms that they hoped would make sense for civil servants, policymakers and practitioners.

Worlds

We give, by way of example, two of the five worlds that were used in the first workshop.

One of the worlds was based on the idea that Lars Laestadius (1800–1861), the Swedish Sámi who founded the Lutheran Laestadian pietist revival movement, had instead chosen the faith of his forebears and had a significant influence on religious developments in Sweden as a whole. Following from this, animism took hold in Swedish society, where things such as animals, plants, rocks, rivers, weather systems and human handiwork were perceived as animated and alive. This world was designed with the rationale that taking the idea of animism seriously might trigger reflections regarding democracy and governance beyond the human world and put a greater stress on relational aspects of co-living. Although many would regard this as farfetched, prominent thinkers such as Donna Haraway have suggested animism as a legitimate perspective with which to re-think the human-nature relation (Haraway 2016).

Another counterfactual world depicted a present where the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus was held in universal esteem for his insistence that ever-present change is the fundamental essence of the universe. In this world, flux had been embraced instead of stability. This world focused on contemporary discussions concerning the balance between bureaucracy and more agile, flexible and designerly approaches. If many current policy labs and design-driven initiatives struggle to create space for flexibility and ongoing experimentation in policy making, how could a society be organized where this was the norm?

Results

To make the concepts more productive, as mentioned, researchers and designers spent time in a further workshop contextualizing them into forms for civil servants, policy-makers and practitioners.

The “animism” world set the ground for a concept we called a “Parliament of Nature.” This parliament addressed questions of representation, especially how nature and “future generations” could be represented in processes of change. It brought forward concerns from a wide array of actors on the planet: humans, animals, trees, rivers, etc. This was aimed particularly at how to make decisions about investments and development projects that would influence land-use and planetary resources. “Nature” was represented by democratically elected politicians, volunteers from civil society, and rotating schemes of different NGOs that had these relations as their main concern. Of crucial importance was that, to earn a seat in the parliament, the representatives had to spend significant time learning about the actor (e.g. river) they represented.

The Parliament of Nature was easy to connect to shifts in political understanding of the human-nature relation, such as giving the river “Whanganui” in New Zealand status as a juridical entity (Charpleix 2018). Also, by framing such a concept in relation to the recent comprehensive Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, which highlights how one million species are threatened with extinction (Brondizio et al. 2019), we hoped to make people more sensitive to the idea that democratic representation could go beyond human entities and needs.

The world emanating from Heraclitus provided the base for two concepts emphasizing constant flux. One concept was the “Fluid Parliament,” a world in which citizens sharing concerns get the mandate and resources to elaborate further on that issue and, with the help of policy experts, develop better knowledge and potential solutions to be debated in the ordinary parliament. Another concept, “Tornado Democracy,” took the idea of flux further into a fluid system, modeled as a series of intersecting tornadoes where politics was based around radical mobility, where during their lifespan a citizen would experience being part of multiple policy spheres at different levels so as to ensure everyone developed a well-rounded understanding of their political society, whilst minimizing the possibility for any single group to emerge as dominant. These concepts reflect the interest in agile and inclusive development in policy communities.

A further concept built on the idea that decision-making and governance could be devolved into self-organized local communities receiving basic resources (money, tools, equipment, etc) to use to initiate, develop and maintain local assets or infrastructure.

In this, local communities would be supported by creative facilitation, but negotiate roles and responsibilities among themselves. This emerged from a scenario where Astrid Lindgren, in reality creator of Pippi Longstocking, was an influential prime minister in Sweden. This relates to increased interest in “commons” and “commoning,” emanating from Ostrom’s economics, with self-organization, co-ownership and co-maintenance of resources (Ostrom 1990; Seravalli 2014).

Subsequently, the ideas formed the basis of designs at the EU exhibition on Future Governance 2030; in a JRC publication on *The Future of Government 2030+* (Vesnic-Alujevic 2019); for a 2030 government of creative facilitators, included in the NESTA publication, *Radical Visions in Future Government* (NESTA 2019); and further scenarios in the counterfactual method (Light 2019).

Responses to the process

When surveyed later, most participants said they enjoyed the workshops and considered the process relevant. Yet, it was interesting to notice that some civil servants had difficulties elaborating on ideas that were so different from their everyday working context. This was to some degree also reflected in the comments from the participants. One person concluded that *“Talking about government some groups were very free spirited and sketched very different scenarios compared to what we are used to.”* Another civil servant stated that it was: *“Undeniably very difficult to unleash your imagination and enter into another world, although it also was tightly connected to our present reality. Maybe we could warm up next time with an exercise to build trust and that would help us dare losing our control.”* The most critical one argued: *“I have difficulties in finding this useful for my everyday work, which among other things concerns how to deepen the collaboration with civil society.”*

Researchers and trained designers could more easily elaborate and play with the parameters, de-coupling them from how things actually work. Despite these difficulties, the groups developed concepts for policy-making and governance and felt they had benefited: as an experience of thinking differently and one which led to fruitful alternative visions.

Discussion

So far, we have presented an argument for more attentive and inclusive policy-making and a mechanism for considering, not only different futures, but different ways of encountering futures as a meeting of policy and publics. From this we can see merit in a form of counter-factual engagement, but also in rethinking the way that policy-makers are embedded and enculturated into the practices of decision-making. What might we learn about how policy-making could develop?

As presented in this case study, counterfactual world-making is an approach that plays with worldviews. The Sámi perspective encouraged reflections on how we can understand human-nature relations: characterized by human mastery/subjugation or relations built on harmony and mutual dependency and exchange (Koltko-Rivera 2004). Another set of scenarios regarded how we should organize human societies. These provided opportunities for the participants to situate themselves in a

contemporary and partly familiar world, allowing them to build on radically different philosophical foundations. In doing so, the worlds did not merely offer the potential to construct new societies, but to consider how public intervention into policy-making might proceed in each, including publics for which little current provision is made (e.g. landscape features, future generations¹).

New possibilities emerged for how policymakers—together with trained designers—could move, step by step, toward designing new forms of governance. For example, when participants in the first step familiarized themselves with the Sámi world, it triggered discussions on how stronger and more elaborated relations between humans and the local biosphere could be developed and maintained in a way that penetrated the whole society. They considered everyday life to be concerned with how these relations could be further nurtured and how citizens in this world learn to pay attention to nuances and shifts in the surrounding nature. In the next step, participants moved further into considering governance and policy-making that led to questions regarding how elements from nature could be represented as legitimate spokespersons within decision making. What previously had seemed odd could, through these steps, be seen as a crucial part of a society. Jasanoff suggests that its through these kinds of concrete worldly engagements that meaning emerge for people (Jasanoff 2010). This is especially true regarding climate change and she argues that scientific facts (with their abstract, generalized and detached character) distance people, while such questions best can be approached by “the subjective, situated and normative imaginations of human actors engaging with nature” (Ibid., 233). Through comparison across the five very different scenarios from the groups, it became clear that much of what we take for granted actually could be re-shaped. It was an encounter with the “designed, therefore designable” (Light 2011, 2019) nature of our world through worlding and making other worlds.

This case study, then, shows not just the merits of the particular creative process but the value of immersing policy-makers, perhaps uncomfortably at times, in facilitated work to shake up accepted practice. Nations are repercussing from a range of shocks, including the rise of authoritarian thinking, pandemic, floods, fires, climate change and other related and unrelated matters for governments at all tiers to engage with. It is timely to ask how to respond by imagining *difference we choose* and not merely change we must react to. It is timely to consider how to restore faith in policy and policy-makers of the more moderate kind when sweeping disasters are turning people toward nationalist idols.

Clearly, there are benefits to process that creates other worlds in the space of a couple of hours and can be adapted to different priorities, while keeping a recognizable and reproducible structure. Likewise, the use of counterfactuality is emerging as a good alternative to future-gazing, avoiding the challenges this poses, e.g. reluctance to predict, adherence to known trajectories. But the successes here also point to a more generic recognition of the need to bring people together at different points in the process of policy creation, not just to make policy but to discuss how policy should be made.

Thus, the process and the generated concepts can be seen as a concrete example of how we can increase our imaginative capacity and consider radical alternatives in policy-making. While it is easy to find considerable agreement among academic scholars that this is urgent, it is not that easy to deliver transformation in practice. This also became evident during the workshops, with the difficulties some participants showed

in making imaginative leaps. However this comes as no surprise; the practice of design often goes contrary to custom policymaking. Bailey and Lloyd, who have interviewed policymakers and civil servants with experience of design, state that “*People whose work lives revolve around highly ordered meetings and texts, the need to appear quickly decisive, and to manage some incredibly challenging issues, can unsurprisingly see the “playfulness” that design methods introduce as inappropriate*” (Bailey and Lloyd 2016). Here we pushed the level of playfulness further than most design thinking approaches.

We argue this advanced level of imaginative exercise is needed if we want transformative change. Future policymakers will need, as Dunne and Raby frames it, to “*suspend their disbelief and allow their imaginations to wander, to momentarily forget how things are now, and wonder about how things could be*” (Dunne and Raby 2013). Increased imaginative capacity will also be central to help practitioners prepare for unexpected future situations and scenarios (Hillgren 2017). The basis for finding a specific and clever radical solution is to learn how to imagine and seriously consider a plurality of very different opportunities. Building a broad repertoire of future possibilities, where some are radically different, creates reservoirs of alternatives (Westley et al. 2012). It also produces resilience, that is, capacity to handle surprise and uncertainty and to “bounce back” into a stable condition if that is preferred, or alternatively “bounce forward” to a better future (Manyena 2011).

We learnt that we need to respect the culture and everyday working conditions of policymakers and practitioners within the public sector. Although many already embrace playful design approaches, we can work harder to train them in developing these skills. As suggested by the participants in the workshop, they need time to become comfortable and trustful in this kind of practice. Some knew each other, but many were meeting for the first time and being asked to step together a long way out of any comfort zone. Our next attempt to change the design of policy will build on smaller steps toward entering radically different worlds. We can also do more to show the possible application of their (re)thinking. It seems the point of being flexible and creative is not apparent to all, despite predicted uncertainties.

In the case we describe, our goal was, in part, to offer ideas outside the immediate policy context of the City of Malmö. Those aspects worked well and we produced a range of novel designs with the potential to travel and help others rethink the futures of governance. To some degree, civil servants can themselves nurture a capacity for world making. For example, many cultural practices, such as literature and film, can support re-imagining society and governance and a first step for practitioners could be to organize workshops round appropriate examples. However, by setting up custom-made exercises with professional co-designers, we also gain their specific skills to facilitate, contextualize and frame alternative scenarios for participants in forms that are meaningful and that address their specific needs. Such professional encounters between designers and policy-makers leaves fewer places for either side to hide in making transformations to address multi-faceted “wicked” societal problems. They also offer more support for those for whom imagining difference is hard, with guided reflection not just on how things might be different, but on the barriers to inclusion of this type of work and how inclusive governance might start with giving permission to oneself and those around one to try things out.

Conclusion

To cope with the urgent challenges we face today, a transformative change in how we organize our societies is needed, with implications for our governance structures and the future of public policy-making. In this paper we have claimed that such change requires shifts in worldview and that taken-for-granted assumptions can be challenged. One way to do this is by developing our imaginative capacity. As an example, we present a case where civil servants and policy makers were engaged in counterfactual world-making with the aim of creating alternative visions of governance, both as a stimulus for local change and as the basis of contributing to work at European Union level on how Europe's policy might be made in 2030. The case demonstrates that although these kinds of exercises are difficult and demanding for people with less training in design, working this way is a promising approach. Therefore, it is worth continuing efforts to build this as a collective capacity in the public sector. In this way, these transitions in democratic policy- and decision-making can themselves be part of an act of democratizing, helping to deal with the new expectations accompanying new types of (digital) engagement, failures in political (digital) literacy and, most importantly, the need for a broader understanding of life on the planet.

Note

1. Though see New Zealand's legislation to make the Whanganui river a person and the Welsh Future Generations Act.

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